DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 483 PS 009 117

AUTHOR Karlson, Alfred Lennart
TITLE Preschool, Primary School, and Middle School Educational Practices in the People's Republic of China Today: A First Hand Report.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 12p.; For related document, see ED 131 938

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; *Early Childhood Education; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Practice; *Elementary Secondary Education; *Foreign Countries; Preschool Education; School Attitudes; Teacher Education; Values
IDENTIFIERS *China

ABSTRACT

This paper records observations made on a tour of educational settings in the People's Republic of China. Discussed are the philosophy and aims of current Chinese education, curriculum practices in the preschool, primary and middle school and in teacher training institutions, The Little Red Soldiers programs and the Children's Palaces. Educational practices are influenced greatly by Maoist ideology. Preschools stress group activities and most have few toys or other physical props in comparison with their American counterparts. Kindergarten curriculum stresses physical development, but some attention is given to art and rudimentary language skills. In primary school, academic instruction and the study of Maoist teachings are begun. In middle school, the curriculum becomes specialized and much time is spent in factories or on communes where children are taught to respect manual labor. Primary and middle schools are very formal. At age 17 all men and women are assigned to work in a factory or on a farm for two years. Members of the neighborhood party make recommendations for further education. Individuals recommended for teacher education receive two years of training, with half of the last year spent in practical experience under a master teacher. A nationally sponsored program that emphasizes citizenship training, The Little Red Soldiers, is part of most children's training by the end of primary school. Each major city has a Children's Palace, which houses after school programs sponsored by The Little Red Soldiers. Children's attitudes and school behavior are briefly discussed. (SB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED135483

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Preschool, Primary School, and Middle School Educational Practices In The People's Republic of China Today -- A First Hand Report

Dr. Alfred Lennart Karlson
University of Massachusetts
Program in Human Development
365 Hills South
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

PS 009117

Preschool, Primary School, and Middle School
Educational Practices In The People's Republic of China Today --
A First Hand Report

Introduction

In January of 1975 I participated in a month long study tour of educational settings in the People's Republic of China. I traveled with twenty Americans, all specialists in preschool or primary school education. Some of us were classroom teachers, others teacher trainers, and others worked in universities. We were a diverse group and represented a broad political and experiential background. In our travels we were in the countryside and urban centers. Although we spent most of our time in schools and teacher training centers, we also visited factories, work places, hospitals, farms, museums, parks, cultural events, the Shanghai docks, neighborhoods, stores, and people's homes. Much of our time was spent in seminars or discussion groups with teachers, school administrators, and the children. Geographically our tour was limited to the north and central part of the country. We were in the cities of Peking, Tientsein, Nanking, Soochow and Shanghai. We traveled by air from the United States entering the country from Japan (Tokyo to Peking) and then by train from city to city. In each city we were escorted by the travel service, Luxshinge, who provided translators, hotel and food services and bus transportation to the educational sites. The travel services also planned our itinerary, arranging for school visits and our busy daily schedules.

We had some free time for moving about on our own although this was limited. In general the staff of the travel service was helpful and flexible, attempting to meet our various requests. For example, we were eager to see special education in practice and they arranged for us to see a school for the deaf in Shanghai. In any case, it is important to remember that the educational settings we observed were from a limited sample, although we saw several.

The following paper is divided into six sections -- the philosophy and aims of current Chinese education; curriculum practices in the preschool and the primary school; the middle school; teacher training institutions; the little red soldiers and the children's palaces; and, some concluding observations. Emphasis is on factual information told to our groups in meetings with the Chinese school committee members, children and teachers.

The Philosophy and Aims of Current Chinese Education

At all levels of educational practice the guiding philosophy is that of Maoist political ideology. The aim of education is to teach revolutionary struggle, to help build a new socialist man, and to teach a form of morality that encourages selflessness and services to others. To achieve these goals educational practice is encouraged not to be made separate from theory. Theory is always to be put into practice, and there must be no false distinction between theory and practice. Educational practices also must follow three directions: moral, physical and intellectual development.

The overall purpose of education in the People's Republic of China was described most clearly to us by Talitha Gurlach, an American born woman who had been a Y.W.C.A. worker in China and has become one of the famous Chinese "one hundred percenters." In a meeting in Shanghai with our

group she stated that the overall goal of Chinese educational practice was to stamp out the last vestiges of bourgeois ideology in the thoughts of the people and to create a new socialist man committed to selfless thought and to the good of the whole, not just a few.

Examples of the purposes and goals of the current educational philosophy could be seen everywhere. In all classrooms there were pictures of Mao, often flanked by slogans such as "Serve the People" or "Learn by Doing." The notion that the educational process should not separate theory and practice was evidenced as workers from factories lectured in the classroom, and parts of school days were given over to productive labor. For example, students took time out from lessons to build a building to house a new classroom, or in shop classes students manufactured electrical coils used in actual production for motors. In one primary school ten and twelve year olds folded cardboard t's in a production line fashion for an hour each day. These were then used by a toothpaste factory nearby for packaging.

Moral education was also clearly in evidence. In the preschool and primary school grades children acted out plays and stories that had "lessons" in them. For example, the children in a Peking Preschool acted out the story of the sheep and the bad wolf. Each child had a part and recited lines and moved wooden figures of the sheep around on a table with the appropriate scenery. The story was of a poor herd of sheep suffering attack by an evil wolf who often appeared in the skin of a dead sheep. The sheep banned together to discuss a strategy. They could see that their strength was in numbers and solidarity and they banned together to remove their enemy.

Moral education was also stressed in the content of language lessons that told of the lives of the hero's of the revolution or in ways thai the

people of the communes worked out their differences.

Physical education was a primary part of every school curriculum and young children through college age all participated in various kinds of dancing, traditional Chinese martial arts, western sports such as basketball and gymnastics, and of course ping pong. Everywhere we were given demonstrations of the children's abilities and strengths in the area of physical skills, and the performances were outstanding.

Curriculum Practices in the Preschool and Primary School

In modern day China everyone works (man and woman) who is able, and therefore child care services are provided from infancy on. Many children are cared for in groups by grandparents, and there are neighborhood and factory day care services for workers. Children are cared for during the eight hour shift that the mother works. Nursing babies are fed by their mothers on regularly scheduled breaks. In most day care centers there is a high ratio of workers to children, about one to eight. Workers appear to be in constant interaction with children. By American standards the centers have few toys, but activities center more around people to people interactions. Two and three year olds learn songs, group games, clean up skills, and other group activities that require few props. Most Chinese preschool children, however, live in rural communes and villages where the family structure is still intact and there children are cared for in the home.

At the age of four nearly half of all Chinese children begin kindergarten. The curriculum stresses physical development, games, relay races, gymnastic exercises, some art: paper folding, drawing and clay modeling, and some rudimentary language skills. But most of the formal schooling is given

over to the learning and performance of playlets and song and dance stories, all that have a lesson in them.

Modern Chinese children begin formal primary school at the age of seven and continue for five years. They learn basic reading, writing and computational skills and have science lessons (intellectual development). They continue with gymnastics, sports and music and dance for physical development and begin more formal moral education by studying the tennats of Maoist teachings.

The primary schooling appears to be very formal. Classes have forty to fifty children, and children sit quietly in pairs paying careful attention to the teacher. Lessons involve group recitations and group seat work. Choral reading is very popular in language lessons with all children reading out loud at the top of their voices.

The Middle School

After five years of primary schooling most children enter into the Middle School. Here the curriculum becomes more specialized and there is a new emphasis on science and foreign languages are taught. The middle school curriculum was very strongly affected by the turbulence during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It was felt by many that these schools had become too formal and there was too much emphasis on the individual student's carrer in a profession or the government. Currently Maoist teachings are most strongly stressed and students spend more time working in programs that involve nearby factories, or spend some of their time in special commune schools during their formal education, where they learn to respect manual labor and the life of the farm workers. It well may be that with the changes in government, following the recent death of

Mao Tse-tung, the middle school curriculum will undergo more modifications.

The Teacher Training Institute

Because our group was made up of early childhood and elementary school specialists, our visits to places of higher learning were limited to teacher training institutes where young men and women learned to be preschool and primary school teachers.

At all educational levels when individuals are asked the question "What do you want to do when you are an adult?" their response is, "I wish to serve in the way that I am needed." At the age of seventeen all men and women are assigned to work in a factory or in a farm setting for two years. None go straight from the middle school to a university, teacher training institute or medical school. During this period individuals are assessed by responsible members of the neighborhood party as to who should go on for future education and who should continue to work in the countryside or in the factory. Therefore, all students at the teacher training institute were selected by the party to participate in this experience.

The course of study lasts two years with half of the last year given over to a practical experience under a master teacher in an operating pre-school or primary school. Students took classroom instruction in reading, science and math methods, music and physical education. In one classroom we observed students constructing their own visual aids or instructors aids for geometry. In music classes students composed songs to be sung by the children. This additional student responsibility was seen as an innovation after the cultural revolution, because it was felt that students needed a stronger voice in deciding their education. A further innovation was reported to us by students and faculty. It was said that since the cultural

revolution students had become free to question the authority of the teachers.

After graduation from the teacher training institute, new teachers are assigned places of work as vacancies come open. Extra curricular activities are planned for students which include intramural sports and political study groups.

The Little Red Soldiers and The Children's Palace

As in the Soviet Union and Cuba the Chinese have a nationally sponsored youth program. It is called The Little Red Soldiers. This is a citizenship training organization with adult leaders. Children are selected by their peers to be members beginning in the second grade. Little Red Soldiers meet for one to two hours every day after school in special study groups where they learn Maoist ideology, practice military drill, produce musical plays and pageants and do sports. Their organization is also service oriented for it is the job of the Little Red Soldiers to help the slower children with their schoolwork and to set the correct moral tone of the classroom and school by leading their lives by good example showing the others the way. By the end of primary school almost all children have been voted into membership in the organization. Elected leaders of the Little Red Soldiers also participate in school committee meetings.

In each major city we visited a Children's Palace. These are large buildings that house after school programs sponsored by the Little Red Soldiers. Study groups, gymnastics, sports, music, practice to become para medicals, and military drill are all offered. The children themselves decide who is to attend, but adult youth leaders help organize the programs.

Concluding Remarks

First of all, these observations go beyond the facts I have reported from the tour and are more speculative, but are not contradictory to the views of others on the tour and have also been corroborated by a group of American psychologists who had previously participated in a similar tour. To the American observer the direct teaching of values and an emphasis on learning the correct value system is antithetical to our stated belief of teaching the individual to think for himself. It is beyond the scope of this paper to compare the effectiveness of the two very different socio-political systems of the United States and The People's Republic of China, however, it is clear to even the most naive observer that many of the educational practices in China more clearly deserve the term indoctrinational, and therefore may have serious limiting consequences when alternative solutions to future problems may become needed.

Secondarily to the direct training of values, is the formal pedagogical style in which, from an early age, children do choral reading, group recitation and rehearse and perform playlets. I do not want to give the impression that this appears to be oppressive in any way. It does not. It simply appears formal. In a primary school art class, for example, children all copy the same picture of Tien An Min Square. On in English class children read in unison. One abacus lesson stands out in particular: The teacher held up a falsh card with the problem. The children responded with a clatter of moving and then hands went up. The teacher called on several different children who shouted out the correct answer from their independent calculations.

A third striking feature is the emphasis on physical training. Children spend much of their school time practicing formal physical fitness training.

This is seen in gymnastic exercises and games, such as running relays, doing song and dance routines. These appeared to me to always be at an exceptionally high performance level. These observations all clearly fit in with Mao's doctrines of physical, moral and intellectual development, and these three observations are hardly speculative. From what I can tell, they are also similar to the observations of others.

A final observation, however, is more puzzling and has to do with school behavior of children that Jack Kounin and other educational psychologists call with-it-ness. In all of the school settings in which we observed, children, even down to age three, appeared to be alert, tuned in, and paying attention to the ongoing activities. This was true also of the children as they watched their peers perform in playlets, or when others were reciting in front of the class. There appeared to this observer little evidence that the children were restive under a familiar oppressive regime of "school," as we have sometimes characterized in our society. We frequently remarked on how well the children performed, how alert they were, and how happy they seemed. How is it that the children seem so at ease in their performances, so well-disciplined, so eager? Our guides felt that this stemmed from a feeling of confidence and trust in their country. They were pleased to see us judge the children so positively and equally pleased to use the children's behavior as evidence of the success of the goals of the educational system. Clearly, this was only part of the picture. Children in China are also experiencing an era of incomparable prosperity, especially in contrast to the time previous 1949. It seems clear too, that parents' family life, now also prosperous, supports the child. Everywhere children appeared well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared for. In all of the time of

our tour I never saw a child scolded, reprimanded or even spoken harshly to. Responsible children often attended our seminars and responded to our questions. The attitudes teachers, as professionals, expressed toward the children was loving, kind and understanding. Once in a performance of a playlet a child forgot her lines. The teachers waited patiently and smiled and the child proceeded. In one primary school we visited the children appeared a little wild -- the principal's attitude was tolerant and humanistic -- they need to run off some energy on the play yard. "You know how children are, don't you?" she said.

A final statement about these observations: I do not wish to join the ranks of instant American Sinologists who return from tours of China and view children in China with awe and jealousy; nor do I want to rail against the uniformity and limited political rhetoric they are being taught. I simply want, on making good a promise made to the members of the travel services and Chinese school teachers I met, to share some of my observations with you.